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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces a qualitative study, currently in progress, entitled "The Moral and Ethical Bases of Teachers' Interactions with Students." The main focus of the study is the teacher's role as moral agent and the orientations within the classroom toward issues of right and wrong as identified by teachers and the researchers. The primary intent is to combine empirical investigation and philosophical inquiry in order to explore teachers' ethical knowledge related to both what they hope to teach and model for students and how they hope to govern their own behavior. This paper explores some of the theoretical complexities of the study and presents some of the interview and observation data gathered to date, focused primarily on the case of one teacher. The study emphasizes four areas: classroom rules, routines, and norms that influence student behavior; choice of materials; teaching approaches; and evaluation and assessment. To date, the research suggests that a level of ethical knowledge does exist for some teachers, study participants showed a self- conscious awareness of what they try to do in their capacity as moral agents and expressed a reflective acknowledgement of the virtues and principles they are imparting and modeling. (Contains 47 references.) (SM)

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# PERSPECTIVES ON THE ETHICAL BASES OF MORAL AGENCY IN TEACHING

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## ABSTRACT

This paper introduces a qualitative study, currently in progress, entitled, "The Moral and Ethical Bases of Teachers' Interactions with Students." The main focus of the study is on the teacher's role as moral agent and the orientations within the classroom to issues of right and wrong as identified by teachers and the researchers. The primary intent is to combine empirical investigation and philosophical inquiry in order to explore teachers' ethical knowledge related to both what they hope to teach and model for students and how they hope to govern their own behaviour. This paper explores some of the theoretical complexities of the study and presents some of the interview and observation data gathered to date, focused primarily on the case of one of the teachers.


## INTRODUCTION

The moral agency of teachers should be regarded as more than an inevitable state of being, created by circumstances that bring adult teachers and children together in a learning environment. As a principle-based role, it should be considered in terms of both deliberate and spontaneous or unconscious intentions, actions, and reactions in relation to what teachers teach of a moral and ethical nature and how they interact with students generally. In this respect, could moral agency be embedded within a framework of teacher knowledge, more specifically, teachers' ethical knowledge? In order to investigate some of the complexities implied by this question, we have embarked on a classroom-based study entitled, "The Moral and Ethical Bases of Teachers' Interactions with Students."[1]

The purposes of this paper are to introduce this study, currently in progress, and to provoke thought about the empirical analysis of philosophical concepts as enacted in teachers' professional practice. As the analysis is at a preliminary stage and continues to be ongoing during the fieldwork period, the data reported in the paper, by way of illustration,

are necessarily limited with a specific focus on one of the seven teachers studied to date. A final purpose is to flag some tentative conclusions from the research to be pursued regarding the level of teachers' awareness of their capacity and role as moral agents and the issue of teachers' ethical knowledge.

**Overview of the Study**

The main focus of the research study is on the teacher's role as moral agent and the orientations within the classroom to issues of right and wrong as identified by teachers and the researchers. The primary intent is to combine qualitative empirical investigation and philosophical inquiry in order to develop a series of descriptive case studies highlighting ethical dimensions of teachers' pedagogical/curricular knowledge and daily practice, as rooted in classroom interactions between teachers and students that reflect consideration of ethical principles (e.g., honesty, fairness, care). Such principles may emerge from formal curriculum contexts or from informal exchanges. The scope of the study is framed by an emphasis on four distinct areas: (i) classroom rules, routines, and norms that influence student behaviour; (ii) choice of materials [curriculum]; (iii) teaching approaches [pedagogy]; (iv) evaluation and assessment. The overall objective is to develop an understanding of the moral and ethical complexities of educational practice as well as teachers' interpretations of such complexities.

In this initial stage of this line of research, a team of four researchers is studying classrooms in five diverse urban school settings (three elementary and two secondary; two public [non-religious], two separate [Roman Catholic], and one private [Jewish]). In each of the three elementary schools, two teachers are interviewed and observed; three teachers are similarly involved in each of the two secondary schools. In total, twelve teachers are the participants.

While a variety of methodological approaches is used, the dominant data gathering method is formal tape-recorded interviewing using open-ended protocols and building on observation data collected during the five-day field visit at each school. During this period,

each teacher is interviewed for approximately an hour and a half on each of three separate occasions. The introductory interview is intentionally broad, and, by way of example, asks the following questions with suitable probes:

- This study is about the moral and ethical nature of classroom life and the teacher's role in influencing it. What should we be looking for in your classroom that reflects moral/ethical dimensions?
- How do you relate to your students? What kinds of things do you do? What are your interactions with them like?
- What do you want your students to learn about right and wrong? What do you do to promote this?
- If we had a chance to speak with your students about what they see as right and wrong in general and in your classroom, what do you think they would say to us? How do you know this? Do they ever comment on it? What would you like them to say about you as a teacher?

Observation of the teachers' classroom practice occurs during this same period. The recording of extensive field notes focuses on critical episodes that exemplify moral and ethical exchanges in the classrooms. This component of the fieldwork provides the basis for informal discussions with the teachers and a supplement to subsequent interview protocols. Resource materials, curriculum documents, policies, codes, and other school documents are collected to provide a context for comparison among stated values; teacher and student documents such as lesson plans, assignments, and tests are also included in the study. As well, each teacher participates in a follow-up interview several months after the field visit. In the intervening time, teachers are asked to keep notes or other kinds of journal reflections regarding events they believe to be ethically critical in order to facilitate the follow-up interviews. To date, two elementary (separate

and private) schools and one secondary (separate) school have been studied. Our visits to these schools have involved the participation of seven teachers.

**Conceptual and Empirical Complexities of the Study**

In provoking consideration of the moral and ethical bases of teachers' professional practice, this study also explores tensions that emerge in the empirical study of philosophically complex concepts in the context of applied, practical situations. One of us has written elsewhere (Campbell, 2000; Campbell, 2001 forthcoming) about how philosophical differences underpin both the theoretical identification and empirical investigation of moral agency. Similar or different perspectives on ethics among researchers and between researchers and participants inevitably influence both data collection, in the design and execution of the study, and data analysis.

Unresolved philosophical controversies regarding definitions and interpretations of ethics and morality underlie such varying visions of schooling. For example, is the theoretical authority of moral agency grounded in ethical principles that advance definitions of core objective virtues such as honesty, justice and fairness, courage, integrity, and kindness (Holmes, 1992; MacIntyre, 1981, Wynne and Ryan, 1993)? Is it reflective of contemporary support for values education or moral/character education (Beck, 1990; Cohen, 1995; Delattre and Russell, 1993; Jarrett, 1991;Kelsey, 1993; Lickona, 1991; Lockwood, 1997, Ryan and Bohlin, 1999; Ryan and McLean, 1987; Wiley, 1998)? Fallona (2000), who also uses a dual conceptual/empirical approach in her study of "how manner may be made visible, as a philosophical concept and an object of empirical inquiry" (p.681), identifies four distinct paradigms that have guided moral education in the past 35 years. Any of those (values clarification, Kohlbergian theory, caring ethic, character education) may also be relevant in explaining one's ethical orientation to moral agency. Alternatively, are ethical values seen through a lens of social justice theories that address inequities related to issues of race, class, gender (Banks, 1993; Contenta, 1993; McLaren, 1989; Oakes, 1989; Weis, 1993)? Do they,

again, reflect what has become known as an "ethic of care" as advanced by some feminist scholars (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984 and 1999)? Does moral agency illustrate the increasing emphasis in the literature on moral purpose and the moral authority of accountable practice in education (Ball and Wilson, 1996; Grace, 1995; Hansen, 1998; Sergiovanni, 1996; Sockett, 1993; West, 1993); the moral character of schools and teachers (Haynes, 1998; Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen, 1993; Kirschenbaum, 1994; Richardson and Fenstermacher, 2000); the professional ethics of educators (Campbell, 1996a, 1996b, 1997a, 1997b; Carr, 2000; Nash, 1996; Ryan, 1993; Sockett, 1993; Starratt, 1994; Strike and Soltis, 1985; Strike and Ternasky, 1993)? Or, do orientations to moral agency reflect some combination of these and other perspectives on what is right and wrong? Within schools, as elsewhere, people use different frameworks to support ethical perspectives. To expand the scope, then, empirical study of such visions cannot ignore the conceptual depth of the tensions exposed by the challenge to confront competing analytical frameworks.

Given the study's focus on identifying how differing conceptual perspectives on ethics influence interpretations of moral agency, the theoretical orientations of the two primary investigators may serve as an exemplar of differing frameworks. As Jackson *et al* (1993) remark in their notable study of the moral life of schools, their judgments and conclusions are based on researcher observations that "come to us from the eyes and ears of a human observer, which means they had to pass through the filter of *his* (authors' emphasis) moral sensibilities, *his* (authors' emphasis) sense of what is important, before reaching us" (p.171). In our study, one of us (Campbell) brings to the study a conceptual lens that supports traditional principles of objective "virtue" ethics, a rejection of moral relativism, and a focus on the "ethic of justice." The other's (Thiessen) orientation extends an interest in more relativist principles of "social justice;" it is a position that may reflect priority on the "ethic of care." Perhaps what one of us identifies as a violation of justice on the part of a teacher, the other would extol as an

indication of caring behaviour. It is premature for us to anticipate how this mixed theoretical frame might enrich the analytical critique of the data by providing possibly alternative interpretations of similar phenomena, as we have not applied our "lenses" in any obvious way. Inevitably, however, they will have already influenced the type of probing questions we asked, the issues we took up and those we did not, and the observations we found most noteworthy during our field visits in classrooms.

Different and perhaps divergent analytical frames become significant not only to the researchers in the collection and interpretation of data, but also to the teacher respondents, whose own philosophical orientations, conscious or not, to moral and ethical issues ultimately determine how they interpret questions about moral agency, right, wrong, good, and bad. How they make conceptual links between these ethical beliefs and their practice is a significant aspect of our research.

The remainder of this paper is devoted to exploring such links through our report of the words and actions of the teacher respondents, primarily those of one teacher. Ultimately, our point about the tensions and complexities embedded in competing ethical frameworks is shown through two scenarios that could be interpreted in fundamentally opposing ways.

## MORAL AGENCY AND ETHICAL KNOWLEDGE

The essence of teachers' moral agency is expressed through both their knowledge about what they want students to achieve, internalize, or learn related to principles of right and wrong and how they facilitate such learning as well as their knowledge about what is ethically important for them to do in the course of their professional practice. Thus, moral agency is not only defined by what teachers hope to develop in students, but also by how they themselves behave and interact with students (Campbell, 2001 forthcoming; Jackson *et al*, 1993; Richardson and Fenstermacher, 2000; Sockett, 1993). These two distinct aims inevitably overlap as teachers, through their actions and

words, model appropriate behaviour in the classroom. In this respect, teachers may be seen to be living by the same principles that they want students to embrace and enact.

**Teachers: What they Teach and How they Act**

The following provides a very brief and broad overview of some general points emanating from the interviews and observations we have conducted to date. In a preliminary way, we are describing teachers' ethical knowledge in terms of how they express their orientations towards the dual components of moral agency addressed above.

In the first instance, knowledge about what teachers want students to learn about right and wrong and how they facilitate such learning is consistently articulated by teachers in ways that parallel Hoecker-Drysdale's (2000) claims in her review of Hutcheon's (1999) book on schools and character-building: "Values, including respect for human dignity, respect for the rule of law, empathy, responsibility, honesty, self-discipline to defer instant gratification, and perseverance at difficult or boring tasks, must be instilled if we are to cope as constructive and contributing individuals with the realities of modernity" (Hoecker-Drysdale, 2000, p.47).

In particular, all of the teachers claim that respect for oneself and others is of paramount importance. Both elementary and secondary teachers emphasize this as well as the compatible function of developing a sense of empathy in students as being central to their responsibilities as agents of socialization. Being "considerate of one another" (kindergarten teacher) is a virtue that is stressed one way or another throughout the students' schooling career. Variations of the "Golden Rule" abound in classrooms whether by direct lessons, spontaneous admonitions, informal interventions on the part of the teachers, or through the sharing of personal anecdotes that start to resemble parables developed with the intentions of sending moral messages. For example, one grade three teacher recounted the following:

> I have a student who has a speech problem . . . And the kids do tease him . . . The other day a student said he was stupid . . . And

> I guess that's where the empathy, the understanding, the caring and inclusiveness come in . . . I told the class that I have a speech problem, which I do. I said, "I have a slight lisp on S's, and you probably can't hear it, but I have it. And when I was in grade school, my friends tried very hard not to tease me about it and to understand that it had nothing to do with my ability." So I thought that's something that they could understand, and he could relate to with me.

During one of this same teacher's classes, we observed her tell the class about a time when she was at school and had to make a speech in front of the whole school and how she was so nervous and visibly shaken. She recounted how one of the other children made fun of her for shaking, but that she felt proud of herself for at least doing it. She told the students that they should work through their fears and judge themselves and decide in life whether they are right or whether others who may criticize them are right or wrong. What began as a simple anecdote, in response to two of her students who had to read the morning announcements to the school over the public address system, developed into a spontaneous lesson on inner strength, courage, empathy, and self-determination.

The teachers also emphasize to students the need for self-discipline, personal responsibility, anger control, and, by extension, the ability to accept the consequences of one's own behaviour. These themes are illustrated by the secondary teacher holding students responsible for accomplishing assignments on time, the elementary teacher disciplining a child who disrupts the class, or the middle school teacher who abruptly stops a lesson to deliver publicly a stern warning to a student heard to tell another to "shut up" during a moment of group work frustration. As one elementary teacher implies, virtues of self control, as opposed to selfishness, are vital for communal living, whether one is in a classroom environment or the wider society. She states:

> They (students) only want to do things they want to do, and I think the message I want to get out to them is, look, we're all responsible for the classroom. And there might be chores that you don't necessarily want to do, but that's life. And part of life is doing things that you don't necessarily want to do, and sometimes you do those things for the greater good. And I just tell them that.

As Thompson (1997) notes, "the demands on teachers to contribute to not only the intellectual and physical but also the moral and social development of children have increased in emphasis and detail" (p.9). Part of this contribution is embedded within the second component of moral agency, discussed previously: the moral and ethical principles that teachers themselves try to uphold in the ways that they interact with students and carry out their professional responsibilities.

Following from Fenstermacher and Richardson (2000), Fallona (2000) refers to such "moral virtues a teacher expresses in her relations with students" as "manner" (p.682), which "encompasses those traits and dispositions that reveal a teacher's moral and intellectual character" (p.684). She notes that such qualities are necessarily moral because they act as models of acceptable conduct. In her research (2000), she found, among other things, that "teachers are very respectful of students" (p.689), some say "please" and "thank you" to students as a matter of course (p.690), many commend and compliment students on their industry, achievement, and civility, and one teacher "honors students by taking an interest in their culture. She talks to them about fashion, their favourite music, and their groups of friends" (p.690). Such behaviour on the part of teachers is consistent with others' research on the moral world of classrooms (Jackson *et al*, 1993; Sockett, 1993) and with work on professional ethics which stipulates that "teachers should work with all children in an equitable, effective, fair, and caring manner" (Thompson, 1997, p.43).

Similarly, our study to date has also yielded evidence of all of these teacher qualities and behaviour. Of greatest concern to most of the teachers is to ensure that they are treating students with fairness at all times. This extends to enforcing school and class rules, disciplining students, marking and assessing them, displaying their work publicly, granting privileges, calling on them to respond to questions in class, arranging them in groups, and engaging in personal exchanges with individuals. Fairness, a derivative of justice, does not necessarily imply uniformly equal treatment

of students for many of the teachers; some claim that, while consistency, impartiality, and equal treatment of equals in equal situations (a variation on Aristotle; see Strike and Soltis, 1985) are their guiding principles, there are many occasions and contexts in which the fairest course of action may be to treat students differently. What is significant in this for our study of teachers' ethical knowledge is that teachers may spend a good deal of time and energy adjudicating in their own minds what fairness means in varying circumstances, and that they are able to articulate rationales for these processes and their consequences.

A second principle that the teachers address, whether they are teaching kindergarten or grade twelve students, is that it is ethically imperative that teachers not publicly "embarrass," "humiliate," or "single-out" for the purpose of derision or ridicule individual students. Some speak of their alarm at hearing colleagues do this. They stress that, while situations and levels of gravity vary, it is generally best to reprimand or correct students privately. We observed many occasions in which teachers took students out of the classroom to engage in "one-on-one" conversations in the hallways (although these were not exclusively for the purpose of disciplining).

Such an approach to students is judged by the teachers to reflect not only sensitivity and care, but also a deeply held belief in respecting the dignity of students as individual human beings. Respect, on the part of the teachers, is manifested in different ways. For example, one teacher asked her grade eight students for permission to allow the researcher into their guidance class where they talk freely about personal, and perhaps intimate, issues of morality. As the study had met all the formal ethical approval and permission requirements, this action on her part was entirely of her own volition. When asked why she insisted on this, she replied that for her it was a matter of respecting the students' dignity and right to privacy.

Another teacher expresses a consequential reason for demonstrating respect: "If I show them that I respect them, then they will start respecting themselves." Another

teacher refers to the need to respect students by marking their work promptly and with care. Another regards the manner in which teachers dress to be significant; she argues that sloppily dressed or casually clothed teachers send negative messages of "disrespect" to students. She states, "maybe it's very traditional, but the way you dress reflects how you feel about where you are. I wouldn't wear a pair of shorts and a T-shirt to a play, and I don't do it in school. It's something that the students notice, and I know that they notice because I've had parents who have told me."

As in the Fallona (2000) study, our teacher participants model respectful and polite civil behaviour seemingly effortlessly and automatically. All were heard to say "please," "thank you," and "you're welcome" to students. Others are inclined to apologize to students. As one claims:

> I have apologized to students and I'm quite careful that way. If I feel that maybe I went a little too hard on the student or maybe it wasn't quite fair, I often do come back and apologize . . . They should see that adults should apologize too when they've done something that wasn't quite right or maybe even wrong. We're only human and we make mistakes. And, hopefully, when students see me apologize, they'll consider that they can apologize too.

Other teachers show their respect and care for students by inquiring if they are comfortable with a window open or by other seemingly simple gestures. One teacher makes sure she wears her glasses some days instead of her contact lenses so that the two or three students in her grade six class who are self-conscious of having to wear glasses themselves would "feel better." One secondary school teacher explains:

> If I don't want kids to yell at me, then I have to make sure I don't yell at them. It's as simple as that . . . If I want them to care about each other and care about the environment, then I have to show care towards them, and so sometimes I'll do things for them. As a simple example, if a kid drops her pen, I'll get it for her. I don't say, "Well, you dropped your pen, get it yourself."

One middle school teacher summarizes what all of the teachers address in relation to the ethical obligations to students that they require of themselves: "I have to model proper ethical behaviour (which is) in terms of fairness, in terms of respect, in terms of

just generally instilling some sense of kindness really. I mean the obvious one is treating others as I want to be treated, and not embarrassing people."

As moral agents, the teachers in this study are able to articulate a level of ethical knowledge pertaining both to what they want their students to learn about right and wrong and to how they aspire to govern their own conduct as morally and ethically responsible professionals and role models. This section has presented a broad overview of the similarities shared by our teacher participants. In an effort to be more detailed and illustrative, the subsequent section introduces one of the teachers in greater depth.

**Marissa**

While Marissa is not one of the teacher participants quoted in the previous section, she expresses the same kinds of principles, virtues, aspirations, and ideals as articulated by the others. However, as in each of their cases, she evidently is distinctive in her own right. For the purposes of this section's introduction to Marissa, one needs to know as background information only that she is currently teaching in an all-girls' secondary Catholic separate (publicly funded) school.

The three objectives of this descriptive account are, firstly, to illustrate six broad but interwoven areas of moral and ethical significance to Marissa that address in more specific detail the principles outlined previously. They are: kindness, gentleness, and empathy; fostering self-responsibility; trust; fairness as equitable treatment; respect; the spiritual journey. Secondly, this discussion raises for future consideration possible tensions among principles evoked by certain circumstances. Two examples are used to illustrate differing ways to interpret one's moral agency role and how we, as researchers, may differ from the teacher in our analysis of such examples. One is reminded of the introductory discussion of the empirical and conceptual complexities of applying different moral and ethical lenses to this study. Thirdly, this section concludes by reflecting on the level of Marissa's self-awareness relating to her own ethical knowledge.

**Kindness, Gentleness, and Empathy**

Within the first hour of observation in Marissa's grade twelve classroom, the researcher noted, "Her manner with the students working with them one-on-one as is the case with her whole group instruction is gentle, respectful, helpful, kind, and pleasant. Even when she explains what students should not be doing, she does so in an encouraging way" (field notes). As the observation period progressed, we continued to be struck by her consistently calm, patient, gentle, kind, and warm demeanour in the classroom. Later in an interview, Marissa explains how critical it is for teachers to be considerate of the dignity of each student. She speaks about the need to avoid humiliating or embarrassing students and to alleviate some of the stress they experience as teenagers. She recounts:

> We're all such delicate human beings, and teachers play such an influential role in a student's life. I remember my grade nine English teacher; I think I'm glad I had him because I know not what to do as a teacher. He said that my writing was too big, it's horrible, well you know I had problems with my eyes, I needed glasses, and he was so insensitive to that to say in front of the class, "Redo it because your writing is too big." This crushed me, and I don't want anybody to ever feel that way.

Marissa is conscious of protecting students' privacy, and frequently takes students out to the hallway to discuss any kind of personal matter with them. It is not always an indication that the student is to be reprimanded for inappropriate behaviour, although it may be for that reason. On one occasion, she asks several students who had volunteered to help her organize a parents' open house evening to come out to the hall; there she invites them to lunch that day to show her appreciation. Her reason for inviting them privately is "to avoid the others feeling bad . . . I just didn't want any hard feelings that I was treating them and not anybody else.

"Marissa is seen on several occasions apologizing to students if she thinks she had misjudged a situation or failed to explain an assignment properly, for example. She also engages individual students in informal chats about how they are coping with various issues. For example, she asks one girl about her trouble with her braces and tells her

how courageous she is for facing up to another experience with the dentist when the last one had been so bad.

In the interviews, Marissa talks about the moral need to be empathetic to students by appreciating how many of them live very hard lives that may interfere with their capacity to meet certain deadlines or accomplish certain things. She says that she tries not to jump to conclusions about student laxness or unreliability, given such a reality. She recounts a story about how a student on whom she was relying to help, as a peer tutor, with a class let her down several times by either falling asleep or by not attending class nor notifying her in advance. Her initial reaction was to be annoyed ("it was a more selfish motivated anger towards her because I wanted her to work with these two kids who need attention or otherwise they disturb the whole class"). It turns out that this girl had been very ill without anyone knowing, and has since died. This experience reminds Marissa "to really give the students the benefit of the doubt."

Marissa's concern with cultivating empathy is seen also in the context of a lesson on proper forms of introduction and the social barriers we impose on ourselves because of self-consciousness or fear. She offers a personal example from her early career as a supply teacher, and tells her class:

> I would hide from the other teachers and not have lunch with them and just stay in my own space. And I got so angry that I had no one to talk to. I thought, why aren't these teachers talking to me, why aren't they making me feel more comfortable? Then I realized that this was my fault, not theirs. I was the one that had to confront my fear and take the initiative. Whenever supply teachers come here now, I always make a point of saying hello to them. I invite them to sit with us at the table and ask how their day was. I remember how awful it felt to be alienated when I was a supply teacher. So now, I have to constantly remind myself to try and make them feel more welcome.

There is a dual lesson to be gleaned here. Not only is Marissa trying to express the importance of empathy to her students, but also she is trying to inspire students to confront their own feelings of fear or shyness and feel empowered to take control of the situations in which they find themselves. Marissa confirms in an interview that this was the message

behind her recounting of this story. It fits well with her philosophy that we all need to be personally responsible for our own lives.

**Fostering Self-Responsibility**

Marissa's concern for reflecting the virtues of kindness and empathy does not necessarily make her excuse students' behaviour as if they are powerless to make responsible choices and take control of their lives. In fact, she feels quite the reverse of this. She explains, "I have somewhat of an issue with morality based on good, bad, yes, no; truly, I feel that we're each responsible for our own lives in creating what we've created in our own lives." She tries to reinforce this in her practice.

During one grade nine class, Marissa prepares to check students' homework, and it becomes clear that some of the girls did not bring their books to class. She says to them: "If it's not here or if it's in you locker, then you're not prepared for class and you have to pay the consequences, which means not getting a checkmark for having your homework done. I know these things happen, and we forget things, and I'm sorry, but if you don't take the responsibility for your preparation, then you have to pay the consequences." She never seems to reprimand students in such situations; she simply holds firm to her decision, explains the principles embedded in her rationale, and patiently deals with any student who may try to convince her to excuse the inappropriate behaviour. Most students seem to accept her explanations, delivered calmly, fairly, often repetitively, and with the conviction that students who are negligent in their work are hurting themselves, not her.

As students get older, Marissa extends the belief that her purpose is to help them make responsible choices, if desired, rather than correcting them when they do not. In her morning grade twelve class, more than half of the students are regularly late. She enforces the school rule regarding the use of late slips for admittance to class, but never chastises students for their tardiness. She explains:

> They're not just not coming because they don't like class, but because of, most often times, what's happening in their lives. And really, at that point if they're doing the work and they're performing, I'm not going to be reprimanding them in any

> way. They're responsible for their actions. I've made it really clear to them. And, if they're late, they'll have to get the notes from someone. I will not repeat the lesson again. You know, there are certain things that I'm willing to do and not willing to do. But if they accept full responsibility for their own learning and have a tendency to get the notes gathered, and they've had a rough morning, then I'm not about to come down on them hard. I want them to succeed . . . And, I've found just welcoming them when they arrive and being positive and appreciating that they've come through all the hell that they've come through in the morning, I find what happens is the behaviour discontinues, and the tardiness stops or is diminished by a great deal.

Marissa's seeming acceptance of student behaviour that others might interpret to be delinquent is based on a strong feeling of trust on her part that students will come to appreciate the virtue of assuming responsibility for one's own actions.

**Trust**

As stated, Marissa trusts her students to do the right things; she does not work from an assumption of suspicion that they will lie to her or cheat. This is not merely a naïve perspective on her part. It is an aspect of her whole philosophy of life, and she brings it to the classroom to foster an atmosphere of mutual trust between herself and the students. This is illustrated within the daily routines.

For example, in one class Marissa has the students mark their own quizzes before handing them in to her; this assessment is entirely based on a type of honour system. When asked about this in an interview, she replies:

> Well, I do trust them. Again, accept responsibility for their own lives. If they're choosing at this point in time to be dishonest with themselves or to sneak in an answer to get a half mark, then that's something they will have to deal with . . . in another quiz, I did glance over it first before I gave them back to mark, just to see, and there were no problems. Nobody filled anything in . . . Again, it's accepting responsibility for their actions. And if they didn't study, then they weren't going to do well. And if they feel that being dishonest is something that they're going to gain from, then that's something that they have to deal with. I can't deal with it for them.

In another class, Marissa hands back assignments and tells the students twice to check the marks and calculate the additions themselves since, as she says, "I've made mistakes before, and I want you to get the mark you're entitled to." When asked whether

she does this to serve a kind of social function and make students feel better, she replied, "no, it's because of human error, right? And I do make mistakes in data entry." On a less pragmatic and more principle-based note, however, she adds that students "have every right to question anything on that sheet, and they have every right to see their marks because many teachers don't even give them their marks back. They have no idea how they've been evaluated."

In all of her classes, Marissa negotiates test and assignment due dates with the students. She trusts them to make reasonable choices:

> Well, in being responsible for your own learning, you also have to have a little bit of ownership in it. And so, if someone else is making all the decisions for you I think it doesn't feel like it's your own. So I give them a little bit of an option. But I still have a time line; I wouldn't let them go on into two or three weeks . . . So, I think they feel better about it. I also remember (as a student) having three tests scheduled on a particular day, and no teacher ever said, "is this day okay with you?" Whereas the next day would have been just less stressful, and I would have been able to perform a little bit better . . . I'd like to be able to alleviate a bit of stress if it's causing them anxiety and stress because they have other stuff due.

In another example of trust, Marissa talks with her grade nine class about an upcoming fieldtrip. She says if there is anyone who is not coming because she could not afford the cost of it to come and see her because "I don't want anybody to stay behind or to miss out on this experience because of that." Afterwards, she tells us that she always speaks to students who fail to submit permission forms for the trip, signed by their parents, in case it is a matter of a money problem. In private, she offers to "treat" them so that they can join the rest of the class. Marissa claims that such incidents are rare since students are reluctant to accept her offer. She has never felt cheated.

When asked in an interview whether she feels that students take advantage of her trust and good nature, Marissa replies:

> There was a point when I wanted to be really gentle and kind and loving, and where I was being taken advantage of. So I learned; I knew there had to be a way . . . I had to find a way of being myself but yet being in the classroom as a good leader and have

> students listen to me without them walking all over me. So it took about four years, and in the last two years I think I've finally managed it. I tell them, "I have certain expectations for you, I have rules. I'm also very kind and I'm very gentle and loving, and you can talk to me about anything; but I do have expectations. And they will be equitable."

A concern with equitable treatment of students is of significance for many teachers. Marissa speaks of it often.

**Fairness as Equitable Treatment**

> Of all the moral qualities a teacher might possess, a habit of being fair is surely one of the most highly praised. The rules of fairness call for treating all students alike, at least insofar as granting favors and privileges is concerned.
> (Jackson *et al*, 1993, p.216)

Fallona (2000) similarly identifies justice as a "kind of equality or fairness . . . a complete virtue" (p.687) that is particularly relevant to teachers. Using an Aristotelian framework for her research, she defines this overarching principle as consisting "of treating equals equally and unequals unequally in proportion to their relative differences" (Fallona, 2000, p.687). She found that teachers, in an effort to be fair, often attend more to those students in greater need of attention.

For Marissa, "treating each individual with respect and dignity" is a matter of fairness. She explains further: "I try to be equitable with them all. We do tend to like students or be more fond of or quick with certain students than with others. And I try not to let that influence me, for example in enforcing the uniform rule, and coming in late and getting a late slip and so forth; and it's a constant battle, but I try to be equitable, treat them equally and with respect." On another occasion, when asked what she would like students to say about her as a teacher, Marissa replied, "I guess that I was kind to them and compassionate and fair. I want them to say that I was fair and that I treated them equally." So, for Marissa, fairness means equal treatment. We observed Marissa on many occasions attempting to make visible for students her efforts to treat them fairly. In one situation, she asks one of a group of three students who are frequently disruptive in class to move her seat; it is evidently not the first time this has happened. She explains gently and calmly:

"Maria, I know it isn't just you. I know you're not the only one talking today, but I need you to move and work somewhere else. I'm asking you because you're in the middle. If Ellen was in the middle, I would have asked her to move." Upon hearing this, Maria moves.

Marissa acknowledges that maintaining equality is not always easy. She speaks of occasions where she may insist a student do something while letting another student "off the hook." It may be because of differences in their ages or grade levels (she is more insistent with the younger students) or because some students are constantly challenging the rules and in need of firmer discipline. She remarks, "each individual is different, which challenges me then on the equality issue . . . So you see, as much as I say I try for equality, there's still boundaries . . . Although I said I try to be equal, it gets challenging, and it is difficult to do." For the most part, we observed her conscious attempts to treat students fairly and explain to them her reasons for her actions and choices. While she claims that certain students may feel "picked on," they are usually the ones who are constantly challenging school rules (e.g., uniform rule). Efforts on Marissa's part to apply the rule fairly to all are perceived by such students to be persecution because of the added attention their behaviour attracts.

Marissa recounts one situation where she taught at night school that involved upholding the principle of fairness in the face of a potentially violent and threatening student, a local gang leader who "said he hated women, had a terrible attitude, and constantly tried to demean me." She explains:

> He would change seats to bug everybody, and I wouldn't allow them to sit out of their seats because I put them in alphabetical order, and he would just think he could sit where he wanted. And then he would sleep in class. So with the fear of what would happen, I could have just let him sleep in class, ignore what he said, let him sit where he wanted, you know. I could have let it all go and I wouldn't have gotten the verbal abuse, I wouldn't have gotten any of that. But I knew it was wrong. I knew that because I'm asking Mandy to get a late slip, and I'm asking Tony to go back to his seat, that he should too . . . It was very scary, but there was something inside me that just said, go with what is true and right, and I won't get hurt, I won't get my tires

> slashed . . . So I persisted. I was firm but kind. I never degraded him, and I never humiliated him . . . In fact, none of his other gang members or anybody ever bothered me. Initially there were dirty looks, but at the end, they were even saying hello to me.

In cases such as this one, fairness as equitable treatment reflects also the embedded principle of respect for the dignity of all individuals, one of Marissa's key precepts.

**Respect**

Marissa spends a considerable amount of time reinforcing in class the virtues of respect for others, courtesy, and civility. She tells the class how important it is to listen to one another, be conscious of one's own actions, and cultivate patience with others: "I aim to teach them to listen and to be respectful of other people's opinions . . . it's the courtesy that you extend to another human being to listen to them." During one grade nine class, Marissa assigns groups for an exercise, much to the dismay of some who want to choose their own groups and who complain loudly about being matched up with certain classmates or students they do not know. Marissa tells them, "Girls, we have to respect everyone, not just our friends, and we have to be nice to everyone, not just our friends . . . I don't want you making comments that can offend other people or hurt them. You don't want to hurt their feelings; I know you don't mean to, but it can hurt." As noted previously, even in her reprimands, Marissa gives students the benefit of the doubt—in this case, that their rudeness is unintentional.

However, she is sometimes frustrated: "I'm trying to work on respecting themselves and respecting others, right, and they're still telling each other to 'shut up' and they're standing next to me saying this. Or they say, 'I got a higher mark than you on the exam.' Belittling one another. And I said, 'Girls, did you not learn anything?' They say, 'Oh no, Miss, we did.' I said, 'Yes, but you're not putting it into action.'"

Despite this, Marissa remains optimistic and persists in showing them ways to demonstrate respect. On two occasions, she is seen to have students clean out their desks even when they are not the ones who left them messy or cluttered: "Who is going to come and clean up that piece of paper? We have to be responsible . . . I have to have a bit of

pride where I'm not sitting in garbage. Let's clean it out, and isn't that nice to do for the next person who comes to sit in that desk?" Marissa confesses that she is not clear whether the moral message is "sinking in" or not; however, she hopes and believes that "I'm just planting a seed, and I think they may remember in the cafeteria to pick up that piece of paper and throw it away. Who knows, but I'm optimistic, and if I can reinforce in them the behaviour, at some point in their life, they'll get it. They'll understand." Marissa refers often to the metaphoric notion of her role as "planting seeds" for the future. It fits well with her own philosophical and spiritual orientation.

**The Spiritual Journey**

As a teacher in a Catholic school, Marissa is expected to uphold and impart the "gospel values"; she does this, not only in her religion classes, but in all her classes by exemplifying the virtues of compassion, self responsibility, patience, and faith. For her, the essence of goodness is spiritual, not based on rigid or doctrinaire ritual. She does teach formally the religion curriculum, but she also expands her vision to encourage students to "have a seeking spirit," "to develop an unselfish relationship with God," to appreciate that prayer comes in a variety of forms, and to be empowered by the sense of living an open and good life. She rejects a notion that religion should be based on fear of God, and is alarmed by some of the ways the students see religion as strict and punishing. She admits, "I don't share a lot of the Catholic Church's teachings, their views. I don't. But as a professional, I would present those views in an unbiased manner, and open up for their (students') own responses to certain things." Her lessons reflect this.

Marissa worries that "when you're told all your life that this is right and this is wrong, and you start to do things that are wrong, you start to feel shameful; you start to have low self-esteem . . . when you make good choices that allow you to go through life happy . . . I don't know what it's called but I know that's when you start to do positive things in your life, your life opens up." She expresses this optimism and sense of inspiration to her students. She talks about opening our hearts. In response to a student's

question about where heaven and hell are, she replies, "If you live a malicious life wanting to hurt people and be mean and never doing good things and only wanting things; if you're angry or greedy, then you're in a state of hell. But if you open your heart and think good thoughts about others and try to do good things, then you're in a state of heaven . . . If I try to treat others the way I want to be treated, then my life would open up." Later in an interview, Marissa remarks that "I'm planting the seeds, and the seeds will at some point in time in their lives, they'll blossom. Maybe not right now; maybe one (student) out of the twenty-eight may get it now."

Because Marissa has a strong ethic of professionalism that would constrain her from indoctrinating students, there is one thing that she does not tell them about her own "spiritual journey": in the past several years she has become a practicing Buddhist. Initially a source of internal tension for her since she felt she was living a hypocritical life in the Catholic school system, she soon realized that her lifestyle and teaching philosophy are perfectly compatible with the best of Catholic principles. In actuality, her journey into Buddhism has made her "aware of every thought, every word, and every action. Being pure of heart has really helped me. It has changed my teaching considerably." She explains further:

> Before I encountered Buddhism, I never woke up in the morning thinking to pray for any of my students or for myself to be compassionate, and to be loving, to be able to get into school and listen to them. My first years of teaching were very difficult, especially with a lot of the students that had many problems and exhibited them in the classroom. It was horrible. I didn't want to teach, I couldn't handle it, I wasn't going about it the right way. It was out of anger. I felt bad, but I also felt angry. In the last five years, that has totally changed. Give me the kids that no other teacher wants, and I start now with the respect . . . So, I have raised my consciousness in terms of their needs more than I ever have . . . I don't let my anger override everything and control me . . . It's made me more conscious as a teacher in being fair . . . I am the person I want to set out to be every day . . . Compassionate, loving, kind, and able to help others . . . So, the gift of my practice is that I have an insight. It's linked to Buddhism, but it's not necessarily just linked to Buddhism. It's linked to life.

This spiritual element of Marissa's life was unknown to us, the researchers, until the end of our time with her. Yet, as soon as we entered her classroom, we noted her kindness, gentleness, and empathy, her trust of students, and sense of fairness and respect. She lives these principles as well as teaches them. The essence of her moral agency is an extension of her life philosophy.

**For Future Consideration**

In describing the analytical process of their research, Jackson *et al* (1993) refer to the alternative perspectives of observers and teacher participants. They claim that "our two hypothetical observers inhabit different moral worlds; they speak different moral languages" (p.141) than the teacher observed. They further argue that "the truth is that no teacher is morally perfect, no matter what perspective on his or her work we might choose to adopt. Nor is anyone else, quite obviously, including classroom observers and those who comment on the observers' notes" (Jackson *et al*, 1993, p.143). By way of example, they question the fairness of displaying every student's work, regardless of quality, even though the teacher's intention is to be fair by treating all work as equal. They ask, "is it not in some ways *unfair* (authors' emphasis) to those who worked hard and did a good job to have their work displayed alongside that of students who seem to have flouted such standards of excellence?" (Jackson *et al*, 1993, p.134).

If one were to extend alternative conceptual lenses, relating to differing ethical orientations that were addressed in the introduction of this paper, to some of Marissa's classroom decisions and actions, questions similar to those posed by Jackson *et al* (1993) could be raised. Briefly, we offer the following two examples for future consideration as our analysis unfolds.

Firstly, in her will to foster in students a sense of self-responsibility, Marissa allows extensions on assignments, accepts students late to class, and permits students to determine test and assignment due dates, as we have seen. While there are usually consequences to be paid for delinquent behaviour (she insists on students providing late

slips for admittance to class; she may deduct marks for late assignments, etc.), these are admittedly fairly gentle and benign. Marissa does not chastise students; part of being self-responsible means for her an understanding that those who cheat or take advantage of her good nature are only cheating themselves. One wonders whether the other students who always arrive to class in a timely manner and get their homework and assignments completed to meet deadlines may feel a sense of unfairness when they see negligent classmates treated so apparently softly and with care. Similarly, those who lose the class vote on when tests are scheduled may feel that they could accept a mandated date from the teacher more easily than a majority rule decision based on classmates' preferences.

When asked about whether her efforts to accommodate all students in this way could be seen as unfair to some, Marissa replies that she has never had a complaint about it:

> And I've been conscious of that because I was one of those kids who used to get everything done on time even if I had to stay up, and then the teacher would say, "Don't worry, I'll collect them tomorrow." And I hated that so much . . . I think if any student addressed that with me I probably would have to look at it and say, "Okay, maybe we could look at giving you a bonus for handing it in." But, I've never had anyone tell me it's unfair . . . They know how I don't react; I don't yell at them or scream at them. So they don't see it, I don't think, as an injustice; they see it as helping another student along.

Could Marissa be mistaken about this? Do such scenarios imply a tension between one principle, such as care and sensitivity to individuals' circumstances, and another one, such as justice and fair treatment of all? Possibly not; however, different perspectives on how the ethic of fairness is manifested in action may raise such questions that challenge the teacher's interpretation of her practice.

A second similar scenario pits virtues of caring and selfless giving against the principle of fairness. In an interview, Marissa recounts the story:

> Last year in my grade nine religion class, we had just finished a whole unit on Christ-like love, to give; you know we did this whole thing on giving. Then the class, which was also my home room, won a breakfast draw; it was just a draw, they didn't actually have to do anything to win, maybe it was bingo. Anyway, it was just donuts and juice. So we had just finished this unit, they made posters and presented things, everything

> was about giving. Giving unselfishly. Christ-like love doesn't measure the cost of giving. So we win this breakfast, and I say to the girls, "Girls, wouldn't it be a good idea to give the breakfast to another home room?" Well, if they could have killed me, I think they would have. I said, "Girls, it's a donut and maybe juice. How many of you even like donuts?" It wasn't the point though; they made it very clear. They said, "Miss, it's not the point; we won, it's ours." So, I said, "Okay, let's take it to a vote," and, out of I think thirty-three kids, only ten voted to give the breakfast away, so we didn't. They said, "Miss, if it was someone homeless on the street, I'd gladly give them my donut." But that's when it's easy to give. And your growth in your life is when you have difficult things to do, and it takes you to a spot inside yourself when you have to open up.

Marissa was appalled by what she interpreted to be her students' selfishness. The students were upset at what they saw as a major injustice; their teacher was not being fair to them in her expectations. Most of the research team, for the moment, sides with the students.

However, if we were to observe such a scenario, how would we, as researchers, document and analyze it: as an example of a moral lesson in action or an ethical lapse on the part of the teacher, or as something else entirely? These are the types of questions we must ask ourselves as the analysis progresses.

**Self-Awareness**

In concluding this reasonably brief introduction to Marissa, we wish to make a point about what we see as her level of self-awareness as a moral agent. At the end of the fieldwork week, she stated:

> I'm happy I was part of this study because I now think a lot of the things I have never ever thought about—truly, I'm analyzing what it is that I do—I do try to be equal. The interesting part of this week is that you have actually made me aware of where I actually am, being the way that I in my head have set out to be. I'm too busy during the day to realize that I'm doing what I'm doing . . . I would normally just act out of what I was acting. Now, I've got myself reflecting on fairness or the equity of certain issues. So, it has really raised my awareness of my actions towards my students. I ask, is it fair what it is that I'm doing?

While we appreciate the credit given to this study, we argue, albeit tentatively at this point, that Marissa's ethical knowledge, whether immediately self-conscious or not, is

actually richer and more deliberately enacted than she realizes. She frequently anticipated our questions about the moral and ethical significance of certain circumstances. During interviews, she identified with great precision the very examples of her practice, illustrative of her moral agency role, that we observed, before we had a chance to ask her about them. She was able to explain exactly why she does certain things in class which highlight her ethical intentions. She understands why she promotes the virtues that she does in the classroom. She speaks often about her own sense of fairness and kindness; she expresses regret that she has not developed a level of "courage" that would enable her to speak out against what she occasionally perceives as collegial injustice towards students. She seems aware of her own gentle and compassionate manner in the classroom.

Marissa believes she is intuitive. While much of what she does as a teacher may be an intuitive, non-deliberate, spontaneous extension of her own character, she reflects a level of conscious ethical knowledge that she calls on to explain her practice to us. In this respect, it is significant to recognize that her role as moral agent is neither a surprise to her nor a fluke of her subconscious. It is an identifiable element of her professional being.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to introduce a research study that seeks to clarify teaching as a moral and ethical activity and classrooms as arenas of moral agency. The study also probes the essence of teachers' ethical knowledge and raises conceptual questions about how we, as researchers, and practitioners define the moral classroom; how can we become more precise in identifying perhaps conflicting perspectives on what makes certain dimensions of teaching ethical and others not? The need to define the moral and ethical role of teachers, both conceptually idealized and empirically based, seems apparent. This paper addresses some of the complexities of grappling with such possibly conflicting perspectives on the part of both the researchers and the teacher participants. Consideration of the teacher as moral agent may reflect not a singular metaphor, but a representation of diverse moral and ethical orientations to teaching. In presenting a limited portion of our data

gathered to date, with specific emphasis on the preliminary analysis of one teacher, Marissa, we hope to provoke consideration of these complexities.

As a final point, we would like to build on what we flagged in the last part of the previous section: the question about teacher knowledge and teachers' level of self-conscious awareness of what they do as moral agents. Jackson *et al* (1993) argue persuasively that teachers "are not always aware of the moral potency of their actions" (p.xv). Indeed, they claim that they are not "consciously intending to act as moral agents" (p.237), and that it is only by virtue of being "basically good people" (p.xvi) that teachers can have a kind of "rubbing off" (p.xvi) impact on students. Furthermore, "the unintentional outcomes of schooling, the ones teachers and administrators seldom plan in advance, are of greater moral significance—that is, more likely to have enduring effects—than those that are intended and consciously sought" (Jackson *et al,* 1993, p.44).

We have always accepted the wisdom of such observations and do not challenge it at this stage. However, as a tentative point stemming from our research, we offer the following distinction. Even if teachers' actions of a moral and ethical nature are not planned or consciously executed, it seems evident that, after the fact, if not at the time of the action, teachers can articulate with depth and intention what they hope to achieve morally and ethically in their classrooms and how they hope to facilitate it. In this regard, it seems that a level of what we are calling ethical knowledge does exist for at least some teachers. Those we have observed and interviewed so far show a self-conscious awareness of what they try to do in their capacity as moral agents. With thoughtful intent, they express a reflective acknowledgement of the virtues and principles they are imparting and modelling. They are thoughtful about the good. So, while the daily acts of caring and the subtleties of interacting with students may still be largely spontaneous and not conscious, the teachers nonetheless seem able to perceive and explain them within a moral and ethical framework. In this way, they confirm Thompson's (1997) point that "no teacher acts without some

concept of professionalism and the ethical basis of teaching. Every teacher has an 'educational platform'" (p.11).

If this is true, then the concept of ethical knowledge has implications for policy and practice in teacher education. In her study of teacher manner, Fallona (2000) argues that teacher education programs must encourage teachers and potential teachers to "consider their expressions of moral virtue and develop their manner so that they may become better models of conduct for their students" (p.682). Such consideration would hopefully lead also to the fostering of more moral climates in classrooms generally. Similarly, if teachers are competent in expressing their moral and ethical orientations to their practice, if they can identify situations and describe them in principle-based ways, then they are contributing to our knowledge base those aspects of teacher knowledge that may be learnable.

Teachers need to be morally and ethically sensitive to the principles that are relevant to both the spontaneous and intended situations that arise in their classrooms. They need to be able to identify issues of fairness, truth, compassion, and goodness, and they need to be wise in the way that they anticipate and approach them. It is exciting to speculate how teachers' ethical knowledge in this area can become central to both education about moral agency as well as the ongoing investigation of how it is reflected in the daily professional practice of teachers.

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